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ABSTRACT

Academic Development Program students face a special challenge. Within a few short weeks, they must hone their reading, writing, and speaking skills while scrambling to adjust to life in college. Usually, pre-freshmen enrolled in the Academic Development Program are not familiar with the demands of academic reading, writing, and oral response. For these students, meetings with Frederick Douglass have provided an important bridge between lives on the boundary and full participation in academic life and discourse. The close study of the life and times of Douglass proved relevant, meaningful, and ultimately empowering. Douglass not only valued his own personal literacy, he viewed the power of words as critical to the enfranchisement of the dispossessed, including African Americans and women. Rather than being daunted by a difficult text, students relished reading a "real" book about a real person. For many students, studying Douglass was a deeply personal experience--they found themselves in the texts. Over and over, students expressed delight and surprise at wanting to read class assignments. When asked to apply what they had learned from studying Douglass, students responded by composing "Fifth of July" speeches and essays that were eloquent and moving. (CR)

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ED 410 530

Meetings with Frederick Douglass: Rewriting the Word and the World

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Academic Development Program students face a special challenge. Within a few short weeks, they must hone their reading, writing and speaking skills while scrambling to adjust to life in college. For our students, meetings with Frederick Douglass have provided an important bridge between "lives on the boundary" (Rose, 1989) and full participation in academic life and discourse. For us, as teachers of developmental reading, those meetings have provided us with new insights about how to best facilitate our students' growth in critical literacy.

It has been our experience, that pre-freshmen enrolled in the Academic Development Program are not familiar with the demands of academic reading, writing and oral response. In addition, they have had little exposure to cultural icons and literary canons. Nevertheless, we chose to focus on the life and work of Frederick Douglass in our work with developmental readers this past summer. We believed that close study of the life and times of Douglass would prove relevant, meaningful and ultimately empowering.

Frederick Douglass not only valued his own personal literacy, he viewed the power of words as critical to the enfranchisement of the dispossessed, including African-Americans and women. We believed the story of how he taught himself to read and write and use words to bring about change for all people would speak to our students' needs and aspirations in a unique and powerful way. We also believed reading and joining in discussions related to the work of Douglass would help our students find their voice within the academic community and facilitate their realization that literacy is key to changes within themselves and society. Meetings with Frederick Douglass would empower our students to rewrite the word and the world.

In Lives on the Boundary, Mike Rose chides teachers of underprepared freshmen who fail to introduce their students to the "discourse of academics." He argues that students must be provided with opportunities to read meaningful texts, to talk about their reading and writing and to use their new knowledge creatively, less they retreat into silence.

Further, Rose criticizes those who conceptualize developmental classes as remedial courses, for transmitting basic skills. Too many lower-level English and reading classes involve little writing, speaking or application of ideas. Instead, teachers rely on objective

tasks which stress recall of grammatical rules or materials read, rather than "seasoned elaboration of ideas."

Underprepared students do not need workbook exercises or lists of vocabulary words to memorize, they need experience reading and framing their own arguments, systematically inspecting and analyzing issues and events and synthesizing and evaluating different ideas. "They need opportunities to talk about what they are learning, to test their ideas, reveal their assumptions, talk through the places where new knowledge clashes with ingrained belief. They need a chance to talk about the way they may have felt excluded from all of this in the past and may feel threatened by it in the present." (Rose, p. 194.)

When our students arrived at West Chester University this past summer, planning was well underway for a national conference on Douglass to be held early in October. The conference, "Voices of the 19th Century-Roots and Realities of Multiculturalism," would commemorate the centenary of Douglass' visit to then West Chester Normal School, just nineteen days before his death. At that time, President Phillips believed Douglass' remarks on racial tensions would serve as an expression of the school's curriculum. He realized that prospective teachers needed to be educated in matters which were important, albeit controversial.

We knew that involving our students in planning for the Centenary Celebration of Douglass would help them feel like insiders at the University. Further, bringing Douglass into our reading classes would facilitate conversations about slavery, literacy and resistance to oppression while engendering dialogue between students of diverse cultural backgrounds.

With this in mind, we asked every student to read the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, selected speeches and essays as well as articles which connected the work of Douglass to current events and issues. Every student also attended a one-person play which dramatized the life and work of Douglass. Throughout the summer program, students engaged in lively small group and whole class discussions, recorded responses to class discussions and readings in personal journals, and composed essays and poems in which they related the work of Frederick Douglass to their own lives and multiple literacies. At the end of the summer, all

students were presented with special certificates, honoring their work as "Frederick Douglass Scholars."

We have documented the impact of this intensive study of the life, philosophy and writings of Frederick Douglass upon the academic and personal lives of our students by:

*Noting individual and class responses to texts and discussions
*Collecting excerpts from essays, journals and poems
*Collating student responses to a special questionnaire administered at the end of the summer program

Did reading and writing in authentic contexts help our students bridge the gap between "living on the boundary" and actively participating in the intellectual life of the university? Were they able to reflect, speak and write thoughtfully about the ideas put forth by Douglass? Did they find working with primary sources personally satisfying and meaningful? These are the questions we hoped to answer at the end of the summer.

An examination of student journals, essays, speeches and questionnaire responses has led us to conclude that the answer is yes. Working in authentic contexts engaged our students far more than any "workbook" ever could. Their oral and written work showed a level of critical thinking and thoughtful reflection difficult to unearth when working with discrete passages, comprehension questions and vocabulary words. Our students' voices say this far more eloquently than our words and data. We therefore have included their words so that you might also experience the power of primary sources.

Rather than being daunted by difficult text, students relished reading a "real" book about a real person. They found the 1845 Narrative compelling reading. For them Douglass was a source of inspiration, a true hero. His triumph over one of the most evil institutions ever to exist in the United States gave students confidence for their futures and an appreciation for the lives they had lived thus far. The following three student responses clearly speak to the power of autobiography and primary texts.

> "It (Douglass' escape to freedom) reminded me of the day I escaped from Vietnam. One morning I was floating in the middle of the ocean. Another morning I saw myself stepping into college. The feeling must have been alike."
>
> -Viet-

"I feel sorrow. I feel pain and chills through my body. I feel as though Black people suffered for a life time . . . I feel empty inside knowing that my ancestors worked so hard for me to be where I am now and sometimes I don't appreciate it. I feel guilty for taking advantage of things my ancestors could only dream of."

-Charisse-

"When I closed the book I felt so thankful that I nor anyone I know goes through all the horror and pain that Douglass experienced. People never realize how lucky they are until they read something this deep. I feel this book is very educational, and I would ask everyone to read it because it's much different than reading about slavery in a social studies class. This is a real life story which enabled me to understand and even want to keep reading so I could learn more.

-Shannon-

For many students studying Douglass was a deeply personal experience. They found themselves in the texts. "School" reading had never been so meaningful, so important. For perhaps the first time, reading was helping to define who they were and who they might become. Again, it is through their stories that we realize how connected students felt to the texts.

"The book gave me a sense of my own background because like him, I'm also black and white. It also gave me a sense that when you think the worst thing has happened you can think of what he went through and realize your problem isn't as bad as you anticipated.

-Tawni-

"I was whipped by a Thai soldier when I was in the refugee camp. It happened when I was trying to escape. I was caught by a Thai soldier while I was crossing the fence. He took his stick out and whipped me about twenty times on my butt. After that, I could not sit down for three days or lie on my back. It was a very painful feeling. Even though I was wrong, I still have nightmares about it . . . Comparing the whipping between me and the slaves, I still do not have anything to compare with them.

-Hung-

Over and over again, students expressed delight and surprise at their wanting to read class assignments. On the questionnaire, ninety-nine percent of the students reported enjoying reading the Narrative. Comments from the questionnaire included: "I seem to want more about what the man was about and what he stood for;" "The book kept me focused and influenced me to want to read more. At times I didn't want to put the book down. I wanted to see what happened to him next;" and "I was finally reading something." Students also commented on how much they treasured reading for the sake of reading. "I liked reading

Douglass for my own pleasure. I liked the fact that we didn't have an exam at the end of reading Douglass. Sometimes tests take the pleasure out of reading and learning" wrote one student. Another said "It has been a long time, about tenth grade, since we read a book in class together and had discussions and journals about them. This brought back my willingness to read books again."

Even though discussions were often heated and sometimes painful, students were eager to maintain the dialogue. Interestingly, the dialogue often traveled beyond the walls of the classroom. Students discussed Douglass outside of class with other students, roommates, family, and friends. One student said "I discussed it with anyone who was willing to listen." While another reported "The book moved me, I felt I should share it." Our students were participating in and finding value in the discourse of academics.

Finally, when asked to apply what they had learned from studying Douglass, students responded by composing Fifth of July speeches and essays that were eloquent and moving.

> "Despite all the problems Frederick Douglass went through, time, dedication and knowledge brought him to his freedom. A black slave, beaten, tortured and taken away from his loved ones survived and became free. He could no longer be enslaved because of his knowledge. Knowledge was his power to get through the struggles to a new life and freedom.
>
> In our day we are engaged in constant struggles. If we hang in there, like Douglass we too can become successful. If we use knowledge, instead of violence, we will have less crime. If we use knowledge instead of ignorance we will end racism. Knowledge is the key to power!"
>
> -Antwanette-

> "On the Fourth of July we should celebrate what America has already accomplished. We should be proud of America's effort for freedom and equality. But America has only come so far; we must ask ourselves what it is we are celebrating. Children are still hungry. Women and children are still being abused in the home. AIDS is widespread and minorities are discriminated against every day.
>
> In the years to come I hope to see everyone get rid of all stereotypes, prejudice and all types of hate crimes. Then we shall, finally become the land of opportunity and then all of us will be closer to actually living the dream."
>
> -Bonnie-

> "On a scale of one to ten, ten being the best, I feel that in the 1800's our country was about a five. I chose five because blacks in most states weren't considered human.

They were ranked with the animals. Now as I stand here in 1994 there isn't any more slavery. I still give this country a three because there is more hunger, violence, and mental slavery than my great, great grandfathers have ever seen.

Why is it that some neighborhoods look better and are doing better than others? Why is it that in certain parts of the U.S. the neighborhoods are still segregated? And, why is it that some high schools better prepare their students for college than others?

I feel that our government can put some of the less important paper work aside and focus on the more important problems such as violence and drugs, both on the streets and in our schools. Concentrating more on the drugs and violence could limit many of our problems.

Our country as a whole is not focused. We don't have our eyes on the prize and if we don't do something soon, we are going to fall as a whole. One of our major problems is we are just talk and no action. We should be tired of this by now. We need some leaders who are willing to sacrifice themselves in order to make this country a better place. Then maybe we can go from a three to a six then from a six to an eight. It is not until then when we can say we are moving forward and not backwards, and the healing can begin."

-Lamar-

Did meetings with Frederick Douglass empower our students to rewrite the word and the world? Certainly over the summer, we saw the students engage in reflection, critical thinking, and thoughtful response. But what about later? Would they carry this experience with them? While it is still too early to tell, there is evidence that the experience has helped them enter the intellectual life of the university.

When Henry Louis Gates Jr., W.E.B. DuBois Professor of the Humanities at Harvard, spoke on campus in October, close to forty percent of the Academic Development Program students enrolled in a college level study skills course elected to attend his evening lecture. The lecture proved to be scholarly in nature, fast paced and intellectually demanding. Still, our students worked at making connections and understanding.

"My response to this lecture was a positive one. I liked the fact that I had already read Frederick Douglass in the summer here at West Chester so I knew about a lot of things that he spoke about when he mentioned Douglass' life. I found this lecture to be very interesting and educational. I even learned a few things about Frederick Douglass that I didn't know before. Frederick Douglass is simply a honorable man and a very educated one too. He has made a great influence on many people's lives even to this day."

-Kim-

"Mr. Gates stated in his speech this statement "We can increase human love with human learning." Which means if you educate yourself on other cultures and people of that culture, you will create a better love for yourself and the people around you."

-Nadiyah-

"We are so lucky because we are the ADP students. We were here for the summer and read about Mr. Douglass' life, so it made it easier to understand what Mr. Gates was saying."

-Hung Dinh-

It is encouraging that so many students chose to attend an evening event that was academic in nature. Even more encouraging is that students used what they learned during the summer to connect with the speaker and make meaning. These students are clearly on their way to becoming active participants in the intellectual life of the university who can and will rewrite the word and the world.